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Citation:

Pechurina, A (2011) Russian Dolls, Icons, and Pushkin: Practicing Cultural Identity through Material Possessions in Immigration. *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research*. ISSN 2078-1938

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# RUSSIAN DOLLS, ICONS, AND PUSHKIN: PRACTICING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH MATERIAL POSSESSIONS IN IMMIGRATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades scholars of home and material culture have been linking their research to ideas surrounding national and cultural identities, not least because of the changing character of social life and international migration, which has provided them with a new context. New types of communication and networking that migrant and local communities utilise in their everyday lives affect the ways in which the feeling of belonging to a homeland, and having a cultural identity, are created and maintained. The processes of displacement and permanent or temporary detachment from their homeland that migrants undertake shifted the focus of research from studying solely material objects to the studies of practices of homemaking that make a place “home.” The emergence of transnational migration has affected the ways in which deterritorialised migrant communities and diasporas sustain their ties and networks as well as reproduce images of the homeland. As research shows, various material artefacts and home possessions which migrants keep, use, exchange—and, in a way, “curate”—appear to play an important role in linking migrants with their “imagined” homes and in helping them to “repair their new identities” (Miller 2009:97).

The principal focus of this article is to explore the relationship between the meanings of objects, homes, and cultural identity, using data from my research into Russian migrants<sup>1</sup> homes in the UK, conducted in 2006–2010 at the University of

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term ‘migrants’ when referring to Russian communities in the UK following the approach which is based on using a cultural perspective (Hall 1992) to study migration. This enabled me to shift the focus from studying migration as a physical act of movement from one

Manchester. As I discovered in my research, various objects that migrants keep in their homes are part of complex processes that involve multiple social relationships, meanings, and practices and by this constitute the overall meaning of home and a complex migrant identity. I will develop this argument by first presenting an overview of the existing literatures concerning the home and its understanding as a multidimensional space (Brednikova and Tkach 2010). I will then discuss a number of case studies, intentionally focusing on a range of “typical” or iconic Russian home possessions which are often found in migrants’ homes. The reason for my intentionally circumscribed focus on these particular objects is that they simultaneously circulate in transnational semiotic spaces (book covers, film posters, and other printed media) where they index “Russia” and “Russian” at the same time as they mediate complex feelings and engagements with notions of “Russian-ness” and “home” for migrants. At the same time, placed in the domestic space these objects lose the straightforward typicality and acquire fluid and multiple meanings. Using these examples I will look at these variations in the meanings of such home artefacts, in relation to migrant cultural identity and sense of belonging.

## MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPT OF HOME

One of the main ideas put forward by scholars of material culture is that homes and the possessions contained within should be considered to be an important part of the construction of such “non-material” things as elements of culture and identity (Miller 2001). At the same time, because of the recent tendency to focus on multisensoriality (Pink 2010:5), the approach to home studies has changed too. Apart from looking at the material and visual aspects of the home, sociologists also started to include things such as the “values and ideations of the inhabitants” (Smart 2007:162) in their research. These changes mostly related to the development of a multidimensional perspective on the home, where “feelings” and “practices” are considered to be equally important dimensions of the home, alongside “place,” “space,” and “physical environment” (Smart 2007:162). Smart emphasises the multiplicity of meanings of home and the role of the specific context in which the participants live and use objects. As she argues, the meaning of home is not fixed, since it reflects various relationships and associations (“memory, to relationships, and to events”) which constitute the overall idea of “home” and “homemaking” (Smart 2007:163).

Pink’s (2006) elaboration of the idea of home goes together with the approach offered by Smart. Home, as well as its presentation to visitors, can be seen as an on-going project realised by the inhabitants through “visual display, textures, music, smells and creating atmosphere” (Pink 2004:6). As Pink indicates, “these projects [...] live in people’s imaginations and travel and change with them through different spaces” (Pink 2004:57). The revealing of cultural characteristics of home can be particularly important in the case of migrants’ “homes in movement,” which often represent a multicultural space realised or presented through a process of imagination

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country to another and to look at the process of imagining and maintaining a sense of belonging to one’s community.

of and belonging to a particular place, neighborhood, or community (Collins 2009:840). For migrants, home is split up: while one part of it refers to a place of origin, another refers to every day experience in the place of current residence (Collins 2009:840). Through practices of “regrounding,” which include an “engagement with objects [...], encounters with familiar bodies and languages,” migrants articulate their feeling of being at home while staying abroad. During this process some objects become diasporic products through which deterritorialised migrant communities can both express and maintain their identity. These objects appear as a relatively stable and solid point of reference that helps migrants to maintain connections with their cultures and home countries alive or, in fact, “to create themselves through the medium of stuff” (Miller 2009:99).

The idea of a combination of different cultural styles in one home which can be result of living in more than one country was also shown in studies of migrants’ homes (e.g. Horst 2008; Olwig 1999). Thus, Horst (2008) shows that Jamaican returnees from the UK tend to settle in the so-called “English” area of the country, for example the town of Mandeville which was occupied by the English in the past. Returnees also frequently incorporate English cultural habits such as cultivating gardens or drinking afternoon tea. In Olwig’s study of West Indian migrants from Nevis living in Britain (1999), the construction of “feeling at home” was studied from a cultural perspective; the author explored how national and ethnic identity and history (i.e. not only personal biography) are represented in material objects collected in the house. Olwig found that the physical space of a typical English house could look West Indian. This had usually been achieved through home improvements and renovations in accordance with the notion of a “proper” West Indian style, such as the inclusion of an extended fenced garden or decorating a room for special visitors (Olwig 1999:79–80). Consequently, home for West Indians has a dual meaning: “first, it can refer to a site where everyday life is lived, often surrounded by close family, and, second, it can mean a place associated with a notion of belonging, of ‘feeling at home’” (Olwig 1999:83).

Overall, as the studies presented above have shown, the process of recreating “home” involves not only filling it up with objects, but also various activities to create and maintain a special homely atmosphere. Daniels (2010) and Pink (2007) demonstrate that home can be studied as a set of practices through which one can experience and realise it as an ongoing creative project. Miller (2009) uses the metaphor of a blank canvas when describing a home: the inhabitants are the artists who are free to create out of it anything they want, or can (85–86).

At the same time, to understand how a home is constituted and what things are significant to migrants’ cultures, identities, and biographies, a researcher should follow an emic approach to studying home, which enables them to get closer to participants’ own views and accounts, revealing individual perspectives, reflections, and interpretations of their identity. In the following sections I will discuss how this approach was used to study certain homemaking practices of Russian migrants in the UK.

## THE NATIONAL TASTE OF HOME

In *The Japanese House*, Daniels (2010) shows how various cultural norms, practices, and stereotypes can be represented in a domestic space. In particular, she explores the relationship between stereotypical understandings of a traditional Japanese home and the way it is actually lived and practiced by Japanese people. Research into migrant and diasporic communities continues to develop the idea that the meanings of homes and domestic objects can be linked to a particular traditional image of home or to existing national aesthetics that migrants tend to reproduce, conform to, or integrate into accepted styles of homemaking in the receiving country. There are several examples that illustrate this point, such as Mehta and Belk's (1991) study that found that Indian migrants to the United States continue to bring and cherish objects that represent certain elements of traditional Indian culture, including shrines, idols, native cloth pieces, and many other things that are primarily seen by them as "authentic 'pieces' of India" in the context of urban American homes (Mehta and Belk 1991:405). Moreover, as Mehta and Belk argue, "migrants treasure Indian artifacts, movies, and songs more than Indians do in India" (1991:407), linking this fact to the notion of the transitional quality of objects, which help migrants to feel a connection with their home country through keeping and using them. Additionally, the studies by Horst (2008) and Olwig (1999) discussed earlier also show how migrants utilise objects and interior styles typical to their culture in order to integrate into new cultural and domestic environments. There are also more historically and biographically oriented studies, such as Blunt's (2005) research on the experiences of Anglo-Indian women in relation to home and settlement, identity and assimilation, and Bahloul's (1996) account of family and domestic life of Algerian Jews in France. Overall, the key notion that these studies explore is that there are recognisable and circulating imaginaries of "ethnic homemaking," which are often reproduced in popular culture media as iconic practices of "Indian," "Japanese," or "English" "homemaking." Furthermore, such practices can be reproduced at home through strategic uses of various material objects and interior details.

Following on this, I attempted to investigate whether there were such commonly circulated images or styles of homemaking that Russian migrants could identify with and reproduce in British homes. It is important to note that the sociological research on Russian domestic aesthetics is still scarce and focuses either on the Soviet period, including Russian (Reid 2006; Varga-Harris 2008) and non-Russian contexts (Kannike 2009), or on the specific form of housing (Utekhin 2004 on communal apartments). Among the studies that give insight into Russian practices of homemaking in the context of migration, it is important to mention Boym's (1998; 2002) work on nostalgia. In her research on migrants from the Soviet Union in America, Boym observes a tendency to decorate their homes with traditional Russian souvenirs ("matrioshka dolls, wooden spoons, and khokhloma bowls"), symbols of Orthodoxy, and various useless and outdated items acquired in yard sales (2002:332). Boym links this practice of homemaking with nostalgia, which Soviet migrants experience in the States and through which home becomes a "personal memory museum" (1998:516). As Boym argues, by looking at the collages of "ornaments and conflicting

styles" within an interior, one does not just see a "private memorabilia" randomly placed around the house, but rather dominant cultural myths and discourses. "Portraits of Pushkin in the bookcase, reproductions of Hindu goddesses, sea corals, calendars with Soviet actresses in foreign black lingerie, images of prerevolutionary St. Petersburg" (Boym 1994:155) find their way into the "red corners,"<sup>2</sup> on the shelves, and in the cupboards in the apartments of ordinary Russians creating a unique and recognisable domesticity. In this research my key interest was not in finding differences in the objects used by migrants, but in the ways of using and signifying those objects in relation to their "imaginings" of cultural identity, particularly through the usage of a certain range of "iconic" objects associated with the imaginary of the Russian home.

Russian identity and, in particular, Russian migrant identity is, of course, an interesting subject in and of itself. Historical and political circumstances had an influence on the constant reshaping of the tenets of Russian identity during the twentieth century in public discourse (Tolz 2006). In different time periods the definitions and forms of Russian identity changed, and sometimes the representatives of one generation experienced a transition from one identity to another (e.g. Soviet to Russian). Therefore, Soviet identity is not considered here as something which stands in opposition to a Russian one, but as a part of a broader diasporic identity which is mixed with other experiences and identifications including those with the receiving country and/or with Russia.<sup>3</sup> The study of domestic space enables me to reveal how these multiple and diverse migrant identities are mediated through home possessions and in some cases transferred across generations of Russian migrants. By preserving and presenting deliberately or randomly acquired objects and/or family memorabilia, people create a domestic space that refers not only to their personal history but also to "a collective sense of past, a remembrance that is simultaneously both private and communal" (Hecht 2001:144).

## METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

The analysis in this article is based on the interviews with a group of twenty-three Russians whose age ranged between 29 and 52 at the time of interview and whose time of living abroad ranged between 3 and 19 years. All interviews took place during 2007 and 2008 and were conducted in interviewees' homes, lasting an average of sixty minutes. Twelve participants described their houses as "owned," four people lived in rented accommodation (a house or a flat), and seven people lived in council houses. The majority of interviews took place in northwest England (Manchester and

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<sup>2</sup> As Boym (1994) explains, "red corners" were to signify a spiritual "source of light and warmth" in the interior of a traditional (peasant) Russian house, "where the icons were kept and the candles for the icons were lit." However, during the Soviet period the function of "red corners" was transformed into the "Lenin's corner." Still decorated with a lot of red, it became a space for a TV and the commode contained the most precious items (151).

<sup>3</sup> On the specific reconstructions of the Soviet times utilised by Russians in the UK, see Byford 2009.

its surrounds), a few were conducted in other areas including Scotland, Wales, and the South of England. All of the interviewees were ethnic Russians or identified themselves as ethnic Russians, although not all of them migrated to England from Russia itself. Eight participants had lived in other countries before coming to the UK, including Canada, Germany, Holland, UAE, Singapore, and Israel. All Russians interviewed were born during the Soviet era in different parts of the former USSR. The majority were born in Russian cities<sup>4</sup> and three participants were born in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine.

Overall, these Russians belong to the post-Soviet wave of migration, which started from the late 1990s onwards and is often referred to as a “new” migration wave and “characterised by a much greater social and ethnic diversity and by a wide range of motivations” (Kopnina 2005:26–27; see also Vishnevsky and Zayonchkovskaya 1994). The diverse character of social background and a greater variety of reasons to migrate are among the key features of this wave. Although all research participants were recruited using the snowball method, and overall represent a relatively small, intertwined community of people living in the North of England, their social backgrounds reflect the diverse character of “new” Russian migrants and comprise university staff and teachers, employees in the private sector, and administrators, along with service industry workers and two unemployed people (see Appendix for detailed information about respondents.)

Typically, I interviewed one person per household, either male or female, although on three occasions both partners participated in the interview together. It is important to note that gendered aspects of homemaking are not the focus of this analysis, however there is a definite room for comparison between male and female accounts in the interview data.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of their homemaking strategies, it can be argued that this group of Russians forms a specific case because they had lived abroad (including in the UK) for some time and, as a result, had already developed a certain number of habits in, and opinions towards, their place of residence. It is also more likely that their notion of a “second” home or “home away from home” is more stabilised, as well as their priorities in terms of home decoration, since they have gone through the initial stages of decorating their places of living or making them homely.

Finally, because the idea of demonstration is one of the key characteristics of my home interview method component (Money 2007; Pink 2004; Pink 2006), it is important to clarify to whom the home is presented or described as “Russian.” As a Soviet-born researcher, I was able to position myself as a person familiar with both Soviet and Russian cultural contexts, which certainly helped me to understand and interpret the meanings and implications suggested by participants. However, the requirement that I conduct interviews in participants’ homes made

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<sup>4</sup> These cities are Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Voronezh, Yekaterinburg, Izhevsk, Saratov, Krasnodar, Omsk, and Arkhangelsk.

<sup>5</sup> See Brednikova and Tkach's (2010) study on female migrant workers in Russia, which specifically focuses on gendered accounts of homemaking.



some of them slightly reluctant to give consent for an interview, since not all of them were prepared to invite me to their homes. As a result, I had to spend more time socialising with them to gain their trust. I followed the strategy of a “novice” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:99), which presupposes an open engagement with the community and involves things like observing others and asking them to explain what is happening, as if I did not know anything. That I had been living in the UK for no more than a year at this point made this task even easier. I also provided my participants with preliminary information which was supposed to help them to consider objects which they would usually forget about and stop noticing. My main discovery, however, was that one of the main reasons people invited me to their homes and participated in the interview was their willingness to help me as a friend, rather than their interest in the research itself. This explanation derives from the specificity of Russian networks and the Russian way of friendship, which is heavily based on informal contacts and mutual support (see Flynn 2004; Hardwick 1993; Kopnina 2005 on the difficulties of gaining trust and the importance of using social ties and kinship within migrant communities). It should be noted that the community was quite closed (some people knew each other for some time and regularly met up and socialised together), and only by being a part of the community was I able to recruit my research participants, gain their trust, and conduct an interview that was as comfortable for me as for my interviewees. I observed how Russians communicate, what they share with each other, as well as being privy to spontaneous conversation during our informal meetings. Overall, my Russian background, openness to new contacts, and ability to spend time with Russian people was an advantage. However, the nature of the research and my affiliation with a British university often appeared to be obstacles in gaining trust and therefore increased the time it took to negotiate access.

### **THREE THEMES IN RUSSIAN MIGRANT HOMES: MATRIOSHKA DOLLS, RUSSIAN ORTHODOX ICONS, AND RUSSIAN LITERATURE**

Russian souvenirs (in particular matrioshka dolls), Russian Orthodox icons, and Russian literature are the objects which, on the one hand, visibly represent Russian culture but, on the other hand, have a set of controversial meanings attached to them. All of these three can symbolise Russian-ness and can even be associated with long-standing clichéd themes such as “Holy Russia” (Tolz 2001), “Traditional Folk Russia” (Zborovskii and Shirokova 2003), or “Intellectual Reading Russia” (Lovell 2000). At the same time, as the discussion above shows, the meanings of these objects are rarely straightforward and, once investigated, prove to be ethnographically rich. What for some Russians may be a true symbol of Russia, for others might be a piece of art, or some useless souvenir from relatives that they do not know where to place but cannot quite get rid of. Such ideas led me to reconsider the role of the “predefined” and well-known Russian objects, especially the iconic ones, and to explore the practices and narratives of self-identification associated with them.



### MATRIOSHKA DOLLS AND TRADITIONAL CRAFT

"Are matreshka dolls objects of art, craft or kitsch? If kitsch, is it self-conscious, playful kitsch, or a self-complacent kitsch?" wonders Boym as she wanders along Russian tourist streets (1994:237–238). "So, we will never get away from matrioshkas?", I ask Natalie (40), a Russian intellectual and poet who left Russia for "political" reasons and works as a language teacher in an English school. As Natalie replies:

I am not going to get away from matrioshkas. I left [the] Soviet Union for political reasons but I did not want to escape Russian culture. Russian culture is my own culture, I was brought up with Russian literature and I do Russian literature. It is a part of a huge cultural legacy for me and I will never reject it.

As this and other examples from my research show, the relationship between the meaning and the appearance of items can be thick and complex, and things that do not have obvious meaning to the researcher at first glance can reveal meaningful and/or significant stories. Whether they appear nostalgic and valuable or parodic and kitschy, these "common" souvenirs are the "faithful guardians" (Boym 1994:235) of their culture of origin. Furthermore, the reason why some Russian objects become significant and meaningful can be linked to migrants' attachments towards Russia or the UK. In spite of the diversity of the responses in my interview data, I was able to identify two polarised themes with regards to the relationship between British and Russian culture. To illustrate them more clearly, I constructed a typology of the participants that represent opposing strategies of dealing with two cultures, which I designate "acceptors" and "refusers." Thus, those defined as "acceptors" are the participants who have a positive image of the UK and try to use various means to integrate themselves into the receiving culture. For them, the change and movement of immigration is a positive experience. They enjoy the fact that they live in a different culture and try to learn as much as they can within local communities. As a result, they typically do not take their Russian possessions seriously and have a flexible and stylistic approach to their home décor. However, speaking of Russian souvenirs, and matrioshka dolls in particular, with other informants, it was possible to notice that for some of them accumulating souvenirs was a consequence of the ongoing tension between their identity and their social environment. For them their home is a "haven" where they can feel comfortable and be surrounded by familiar things. Obviously, an emphasis on possessing and nostalgically using "homeland" objects is not unique to Russian migrants and is a practice found in diasporic cultures all over the world. However, in the case of this group of informants it becomes a part of their way of life: being "in exile" is a part of the articulated personhood they maintain while living abroad. Correspondingly, a matrioshka doll can become a symbol of their struggle and a reminder of their "true" identity and their "roots." For example, for Olga (41), souvenirs remind her not only about her Russian identity, but also about her rejection of the English culture. To her, putting matrioshka dolls and other souvenirs on display is a way of telling herself that she "does not want to be English." This type of identity, I refer to as "refusers," which characterises those

people who have an ambivalent attitude towards the UK. "Refusers" are generally unhappy with British culture, resist all British influence, and tend to consider their home in England as an "escape" into a familiar and comfortable environment where their possessions have a great deal of personal significance. "Refusers" tend to take souvenirs seriously and their approach to homemaking can be compared to creating a museum where they keep and cherish their artifacts. To "refusers," homemaking is often linked to nostalgia (to the Soviet past, to their childhood years, or to people they used to know); at least in some sense, their homemaking strategies reflect the value and meaning they assign to resisting change, and to active, ongoing connections with people, objects, and foods of their past. For some "refusers," exhibiting Russian souvenirs is a way of showing to the local residents how rich and prosperous Russian culture is. For example, Alevtina (52), who visits Russia annually and always brings back souvenirs for herself and her British friends, explained that the idea behind her gifts was not only to please a person, but also to prove to them that Russia is a "progressive country with a rich culture and impressive historical artefacts":

I brought many different things from Russia, not restricting myself to typical "wooden spoons." I particularly like the gorgeous calendars with views of Saint Petersburg. There are fantastic pictures of Russian palaces, the Peterhof palace, Pavlovsk city, Pushkin city. It is such a luxury! They [the English] could not imagine that Russians live in such luxury. They think that bears walk down the streets, and that there is a lack of food. But when I showed them that Moscow and Saint Petersburg are even more affluent than Versailles, they saw how it is.

On the other hand, Natasha (29) is one of those people who owns various folk items and believes that these items represent Russian culture in the best way. On her first trip to the UK, Natasha brought a samovar that she still considers to be one of her most significant items. To Natasha, the objects she brought over with her gained a special meaning when she moved abroad. In England, they seemed more significant to her and they conveyed more depth about Russian identity. When she arrived in Manchester to get married and to settle with her English husband, she concluded that Russian culture was deeper than English culture and that this depth could be represented through traditional artefacts and souvenirs. As she explained, all these things reminded her of her roots and demonstrated the richness of Russian culture:

OK, what do they [the English] have? I can put Orthodox icons on the walls, place matrioshkas around the house, a samovar. We also have a fantastic literature. Even the backs of our books placed on a shelf can tell you a lot! Actually, I could bring even more things such as a balalaika, a Russian winter hat with earflaps (*шапка-ушанка*), and many more of our symbols. And what about them [the English]? What symbols of their country they can put on the walls? What can they offer? A telephone booth?

In both Alevtina and Natasha's examples, the fact of acquiring certain Russian objects was a result of comparing Russian and English culture and the symbolic value

that each culture could offer. The objects which women bring with them have a two-fold function. On the one hand, objects help them to maintain their Russian identity ("remind me of my roots"), but on the other hand, they emphasise this (re)constructed identity in relation to their perceptions of Englishness and English people.

From a competing perspective, for many "acceptors," placing matrioshka dolls, Russian books, and icons on display is not only a way of manipulating the appearance of the home, but also a way of integrating into the English context. Finding new schemes of homemaking which integrate several cultures helps migrants to keep their Russian-ness whilst developing a sense of their own acquired English-ness. In *Stuff*, Miller (2009) illustrates this last point using the example of Caribbean migrants in modern London who choose the strategy of synthesis in order to keep their roots. In this sense, "acceptors" are more open to change, the desirability of change is one of the reasons they give for their migration. "Acceptors" would like to have a mixture of experiences and, as a result, a mixture of objects in their home, representing the fluid and syncretic narrative of their attachments. According to "acceptors," their matrioshkas help them to stay connected to their native land and culture but without trying to "resist" the influence of English culture, which they perceive as "different, but not contradictory" and "harmless," according Larissa (40), a divorcee who has lived in the North of England for eight years and works as a counsellor.

At the same time, "nostalgia easily yields itself to kitsch" (Boym 1998:517), and this often happened among "acceptors" who had a tendency to use souvenirs quite ironically, deliberately emphasising their lack of "arty/non folksy" aesthetics. The acquisition of objects commonly recognised as banal and in bad taste was defined by Sontag as "camp sensibility" (1964:275) and elaborated further by Boym (1994) and Sabonis-Chafee (1999) in relation to the post-Soviet cultural context. "Camp" is defined as the deliberate and mocking use of kitsch; a self-conscious play with images and meanings. It is possible to see that camp use of kitsch is popular among those Russian migrants in the UK who considered themselves to be playing the role of Russians in the British multicultural world.<sup>6</sup> Because the meaning of such items as matrioshka is "too Russian" (i.e. because they are too Russian, and everybody knows that they are too Russian) they start lacking "subjective" importance. Outside Russia these symbols of the Soviet or "folky" Russia are mostly perceived as tourist souvenirs and are not taken seriously, which enables migrants to play with their images and meanings. In this sense, carpets, matrioshkas, and samovars belong to the category of "kitsch camp," as things which Russians find nice, comedic, and aesthetically displeasing in equal measures. Because of its too straightforward "stereotypical" Russian quality, owning matrioshka does not require migrants to be attached to them very much or treat them in any special way. Moreover, a recent tendency to incorporate the symbols of folk and Soviet Russia in advertising and popular culture in Russia (Sabonis-Chafee 1999) makes this use of kitsch even more popular both in and outside Russia.

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion on the performative function of Russian diasporas in Britain, see Byford 2009.

All in all, the reasons why Russian migrants choose to decorate their homes in one way or another are linked to their relationship with the notion of home and positionality in the receiving culture. While for one group the idea of belonging is realised through their conflict with the receiving culture, for another group it is a form of integration and synthesis into a multicultural society. At the same time, it should be noted that the presented typology represents analytically constructed ideal types. In reality, and this will be illustrated later on in the text, the two types and dimensions are comprised of combinations of many different characteristics. What is important in this division is the principal differences in the significance of their possessions to their sense of Russian-ness, which consequently affects people's ways of choosing and explaining the meaning of their home possessions and overall homemaking. While the "refusers" tend to cherish and personalise their Russian possessions, the "acceptors" are more relaxed about the material aspects of their life. Although the "acceptors" may have many different things brought from Russia or given to them by family members, they feel at liberty to leave them all behind in an instant—for example, if they were to move away. They take care of their possessions and are attached to them, but do not consider them to be their only important or irreplaceable objects.

#### RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY

An interesting aspect of the meaning of icons is that, although they were one of the most frequently present items in participants' houses, they usually had nothing to do with religion or orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, not everyone could remember when or why an icon had come into their possession. With regard to religious objects, participants frequently could not decide what an icon meant to them and what the purpose of having it was. Some tried to find non-religious explanations and connected the icons to general spiritual/energy forces that would safeguard them. In these cases an icon was kept "for protection" or "safety." Such people did not reflect on why they followed religious rituals, for them it was part of their cultural identity and long-established tradition (the practice of keeping an icon in the car was explained in the same way). However, there were people who provided well-developed explanations of the reasons of having icons in the home.

For example, Natalie, mentioned above, bought her icons during a Trans-Siberian journey, which had been paid for as a bonus by her employers in a tourist agency. For her the icon carries primarily a cultural meaning that reminds her of Russian history and traditions:

It tells me about Russia. I am definitely not religious. I do not go to church and I have no idea where the Russian church is in Manchester. An icon is a piece of

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<sup>7</sup> This statement does not apply to the older migrants, or to some "devotees" among the migrants who discovered religion after the Soviet era. These people regularly attend liturgy and adhere to all significant religious festivals, including periods of fasting, and an icon is an important religious object to them. For such Russians, an icon is a symbol of religion, in front of which they pray. However, this was not typical for the majority of my interviewees.

Russia for me. I bought it in Yekaterinburg during my Trans-Siberian journey. I bought it in a Cathedral where the Tsar's family was killed. It is a relic for me, which of course connects me to Russia. But at the same time it is not very serious.

Julia (40) also keeps an icon as a reminder of Russia and Russian culture. She is married to an Englishman and the couple live in their own house with their son in Preston. She acknowledges cultural differences between the two countries and tries to strike a balance between Russian-ness and English-ness in her everyday life—this articulated desire for “balance” makes her an “acceptor,” rather than a “refuser.”

I do not consider myself a believer, but I do agree that one or two icons can never be an odd thing. Yes, I feel that it is a part of our culture but it is more related to Russia. In the Soviet Union we all were atheists. It was not approved to go to church to pray. I feel that the Orthodox Church is a part of our culture. Sometimes I go to church when I am in Russia. I baptised my son into the Orthodox Church. We believe but do not practice. I celebrate some of the religious holidays but it is not part of my everyday life.

Some participants received icons from somebody else, usually as a gift from relatives or friends, and because of that they felt obliged to keep it. For instance, George (36) kept the icon that he had received from a classmate who became a priest as a reference to this “unusual” fact. Inna (33) and Anton (34), who live in Manchester in their own house with their small son, keep their icon only because it was given to them by Anton's mother. Not being able to throw it away, they had put the icons given to them by his mother on top of a kitchen cupboard, where only my searching eyes could spot them. Anton explained:

It is one of the objects which were given to us “by force.” For instance these icons near the clock were brought here by my mom. We had to put it somewhere because we do not have the courage to throw them away.

Finally, there are people like Max (37), who consider icons or religious items to be objects of art and part of the Russian cultural legacy. Max is a single man who lives in his own house and also owns an apartment in an area close by. He has decorated his house in a modern style with contemporary paintings and designer minimalist furniture. For him, Russian-ness can be represented in pieces of art such as paintings, icons, or porcelain. He feels comfortable living in England and sees a lot of advantages to it. He considers himself to be different from the average Russian as well as from his Russian friends, whom he described as intelligent, highly educated, and successful people “most of whom are UK residents with stable jobs ... not construction sites workers with no security.”

An icon dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century was the only “Russian” item which Max had brought with him. He commented that he would have liked to bring more things like it if he had the opportunity and if there were fewer customs constraints. Max sees himself as a very “modern” person who can easily

travel and adapt to a new society. He is a typical “acceptor”: he likes Britain and the living and working conditions he has experienced there. He speaks disapprovingly of those who refuse “flexibility” and do not integrate into the receiving society—those who only socialise with their compatriots and speak their native language. Max insisted that anyone who wants to live and become successful in the UK must integrate and adjust to the norms and rules of the host society:

There are people who do not fit well into the society (*вписываться*). Like Polish people who communicate within the community and do not speak the English language. We [the Russians] have people who have prestigious jobs and careers. But to achieve this one has to be embedded into the society. One has to understand the culture and to study the behaviour patterns. You cannot bring a piece of Russia with you and carry it everywhere. But you can keep this piece privately at home not taking it out for the public.

As Max later admitted, his “piece of Russia” is the icon which is placed in his bedroom next to the painting brought from Paris. Although he insisted that an icon is only a part of “cultural heritage,” he later confirmed that he felt a spiritual connection to it too. “There is something special about it, it is unique and unusual.” Why it is so important to him? As Max answered, “I want to have an icon to feed my roots, to remind me about them and about where I come from.” It should be noted that to explain some of the activities that they did (going to church, reading Russian books, keeping icons in home, and bringing back Russian souvenirs), Russians often referred to “Russian roots,” which they could not avoid and which made them do things. Some people like Max deliberately wanted to remind themselves about their “roots” in order “to remember/not to forget.” For others, like Larissa, “roots” do not need to be reminded of as they are part of the identity and constantly present in every day life.

Overall, as the above examples demonstrate, an icon is an object that evokes a range of associations in migrant homes. Thus, it was possible to see that for some Russians, the religious items became “diasporic” objects which did not connect them to Orthodoxy, but reminded them of Russia and helped them to feel like themselves as Russian while living in the UK. However, not all Russians were happy to have icons in their homes, which were usually given to them by close relatives or friends. But even then they “did not have the courage” (*рука не поднимается*) to remove them, as it could go against cultural norms.

## RUSSIAN LITERATURE AND BOOKS

According to general opinion among the research participants, the appreciation of Russian literature, books, and the Russian language in general is a typical characteristic of Russian people, who “always bring books” back from Russia. Overall, obtaining and using things related to the Russian language such as books and films was an important part of reaffirming Russian identity for migrants from both groups (“acceptors” and “refusers”). For people like Julia and Alevtina, the display of books in the living room is definite signifier of Russian culture, which is associated with an

established reading culture. As they both mentioned, their homes were different compared to British ones, and definitely “Russian” because of the large quantities of books they owned. As Julia explained, when she and her husband were looking for a house to move into together, she was surprised to discover that nobody had books in their homes. “When we came to view this house the first thing I noticed a book about Stalingrad in the living room”; this fact eventually influenced her decision to choose the house.

As a rule, Russian books are on display in the living room and easily identifiable. Most of them are brought from Russia, on initial trips back there; however, later, as many participants admit, Russian books become just a part of the house’s décor. The changing character of the significance of the Russian objects can be illustrated by Oleg (48), who is a physicist from Moscow living in his own flat in Manchester. Oleg had left four big boxes containing his favourite books in a friend’s garage in Russia and remembered about them only years later when his friend informed him that the books had rotted due to damp. Oleg felt sorry about the books but as soon as he came back to Manchester he forgot the incident. “These things are significant for me but as life shows, I can live without them and I can replace them when I need to,” he said when explaining that one does not need material objects around to feel Russian “if other basic things, such as a job, are sorted.” As Oleg says, he does remember and feel that he is Russian when he has direct emotional stimuli such as smell, taste, or hearing the language. His Russian identity is not a reflection or thought but an immediate experience of the here-and-now: of eating, drinking, and talking, usually during one of his regular trips to Russia. But as soon as he gets back to his routine in Manchester, he does not think much about it.

On the opposite side, there are others, like Tanya (37), to whom their Russian identity has been strengthened through time living abroad. Tanya is also a physicist at another northern university, and collecting Russian books became one of her primary interests when she moved to England. She is particularly fond of Russian classic literature and poetry, which she buys in Russia or on her holidays in the UK and Europe and keeps in her home on display. After having lived in the UK for some time, she has come to the conclusion that the Russian language is the most important thing helping her to maintain her Russian identity and consider herself a Russian. Therefore, the only objects that she is attached to are her Russian books, which to her represent Russian language and Russian culture in material form.

Her life in the UK and her interest in the Russian classics has led Tanya to ponder deeply on what Russian-ness is and how it can be represented and explained:

Now, when I have been living abroad for some time, I have an incredible interest in Russia, I want to travel across the country, to see places. I would never have thought that I would be interested in my people and the life they live. Suddenly I have this interest now.

She started to travel to Russia a lot, taking photographs of the Russian provinces, people, and nature. The interior of her house reflects some Russian motifs and, apart



from shelves with books on display, contains such elements as fir cones, ash branches, calendars, and pictures of Marina Tsvetaeva.

For a long time I have brought only books from my visits to Russia. I am not attached to objects that much. I can buy everything in the UK. Books in Russian are the only material objects that I miss from Russia.

By contrast, Natalie expressed a different attitude, as she has left Russia forever. This does not mean that she severed all ties with it though. She is still attached to the Russian language and Russian literature, and is a poet herself. As she said, she had brought "suitcases of books" with her from Russia in the beginning and continued to buy books every time she visited Russia. However, to her Russian books are not artifacts which she collects and cherishes, but a connection to modern Russian trends in literature and intellectual discourse. Interestingly, although she needs Russian books, she does not feel the need to speak Russian or to have Russian friends. Like Tanya, Natalie has just a few Russian friends in England but says she does not feel lonely. She is happy with the people around her and does not believe that she needs to change anything. She likes the nature of her friendships, which she defined as being more distant and independent compared to her Russian friendships. She characterised the latter as being "extremely close and dramatic relationships."<sup>8</sup> All of her Russian friends were "young and successful professionals with similar educational background" (university degree at least) and who mixed easily with her British friends.

The Russian language is important to her, she wants to know how it changes and what the latest trends in contemporary writing are. But she does not need the people or the country for that. She described herself as a "dedicated emigrant" because she "always wanted to leave Russia" due to her political beliefs. With regards to her relationship with the host country, Natalie also has a precise identification:

I am a Russian-born British. This means that I am a British person who is a little bit different from other British people. My mentality is not Russian. I have a totally different attitude. Russians do not take me as a Russian anymore. They think I am a foreigner who speaks very good Russian.

Natalie's case is also interesting as it shows the connection between the process of migration and the material objects that signify it. The living room in Natalie's home has several identifiable themes which relate to the country where she was born or those she had visited: Russia is her native country, Israel is the country where she migrated from Russia due to her mother's Jewish origins, and both Italy and Tibet represent the cultures which she became particularly fond of after visiting them and "which mean to [her] a lot personally." She decorated her fireplace according to this division. "Russia" was presented in the middle through icons, souvenirs, pictures; at the sides there were some other souvenirs representing "Italy," "Israel," and "Tibet."

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<sup>8</sup> For analysis of the Russian way of friendship see Kharkhordin 2009; Shlapentokh 1984.

Interestingly, the British culture Natalie strongly identifies with, for she has been living in Britain for ten years, is not presented via material items which she would describe as important and deem worthy of displaying. Whether this is a sign of successful integration into the receiving country or another confirmation of the idea that carrying pieces of the “native country” around means that one never manages to leave it properly is a fascinating area which requires further research.

Overall, it was possible to see that like other predefined objects Russian books carry both material and symbolic significance. In migrants’ homes their usability and primary function become less important than their symbolic value, which ultimately enables “the creation and continuous renewal of social relationships” (Daniels 2009:391). However, while for some people a collection of Russian books on display can represent an attachment to the Russian language which they feel the need to cultivate in a foreign environment, for others books are important elements of a homely atmosphere which reminds them of Russian culture and its cultural heritage.

## CONCLUSION

In this section, I would like to reflect on the core question of this article about the relationship of meanings of home possessions in a Russian home abroad and Russian identity and culture. As far as I see it, there are several aspects of homemaking that help in drawing conclusions about the “Russian-ness” of some possessions and homes. One aspect refers to the relationship between Russian identity, homemaking, and migration. Based on my observations during this study, I would have expected to find that migrants’ sense of Russian-ness is more explicit because they have had to construct it deliberately against the background of a new place of residence and new material and social culture. The act of moving encourages ordering behaviour, or to put it another way, when moving between permanent-seeming (“seeming” because these temporary dwellings can be inhabited for years without being seen as a true destination) homes people tend to re-assess the relative importance of everything in their lives, from possessions to people and to jobs.

Migration also has a visual implication in that migrants are a group which is visually different from the locals in terms of dress, culture, traditions, and family rituals. However, for some “refusers,” the presence of a familiar materiality in everyday life is an important part of preserving and maintaining of their Russian identity in the face of an antagonistic attitude to British culture. On the other hand, “acceptors” do not focus on preserving their Russian identity through material objects as much as do “refusers.” They make attempts to integrate and collaborate with British culture and in general perceive their migration experience to be positive. People like Max and Natalie, discussed in the above sections, give priority to adjusting to the new culture and developing an integrated “British” identity as though they were combining two cultures rather than trying to follow one of them strictly. However, even if some of the “acceptors” adopted a rather critical position towards Russia as a country (in terms of things like the government, red tape, and social

rules), they did not completely deny their Russian origins. For example, they might express it as “I am a different type of Russian with a more western attitude” (Max), and at the same time, still have Russian friends and, some possessions from Russia in their homes that were significant for them. Some of them come to the conclusion that in addition to a Russian identity they also have some “British” features. For example, Natalie and Max mentioned that they maintained their friendships and social relationships differently from the traditional Russian style, where informal and close ties are highly appreciated.

Overall, the way different groups of migrants perceive the receiving culture affects their approach to reconstructing their own sense of Russian-ness at home and the significance of typical Russian possessions such as folk souvenirs and matrioshka dolls, Orthodox icons, and books in Russian. The constructed binary between “acceptors” and “refusers” helps to illustrate more vividly that although home possessions to a large degree carry personal meanings, there is also a cultural meaning that makes certain objects into cultural indicators. By looking at matrioshka dolls and other Russian items and discussing them with the participants, it was possible to see something more than a simple picture of a home interior. In some cases, objects represent a love of Russia but in others they are symbols of ambivalence about the UK. In other words, it is possible to say that objects compose a picture of a Russian home, but people explain what each of the elements of the picture means according to their attitudes towards the places in which they live and the people they know.

As the interviews showed, not all the Russians brought possessions with them on arrival. Many of the interviewees acquired possessions that represent Russia after having lived in the UK for some time, owing to specific circumstances in their personal lives. For example Tanya, discussed above, started reflecting more on what it is that she likes and does not like about being Russian after she lived in England for some time. After doing certain things or having had certain experiences, some Russians wanted to have particular things around them. These types of experiences can be defined as ones which encourage Russian people to reflect on their identities and, as a result, acquire Russian possessions or incorporate characteristically Russian styles into their home environments (houses or gardens). The subtle variations I have found in people’s perceptions of the nature of Russian identity support the idea of the Russian-ness of home as something relative, interacting with all the other fixed and changeable components of the identity of an individual. One interviewee likened their Russian-ness to a flavour, something intangible which comes and goes, passes one by and can be consciously experienced only briefly and sporadically. This fleeting and intangible quality of the Russian element of identity came to the fore when my questions were concerned with things which remained untouched in one place for many years, generally gifts from relatives.

It is important to note that the question of whether the participants considered themselves to have some Russian items in the house (or “a Russian theme”), or to have a Russian house, also made a difference. For example, George, who was happy to define himself as someone who had some Russian possessions, totally refused the

idea of having a Russian home. In the same way, Max had a Russian icon in his bedroom, while the rest of the house was decorated in a neutral, modern style. For some, a Russian home had negative connotations and meant a lack of style. George was very disapproving when he described a typical Russian interior referring to it as “unified” and “philistine” (*мещанство*) with specific features such as cut glass cabinets and “books arranged by colour.” But in spite of this attitude, George did not throw away all of his “Russian” possessions because he felt an intangible attachment to them.

The characteristics discussed above demonstrate the peculiar, ambiguous, and sometimes controversial character of objects. The same items can have different meanings for different people, they can be simultaneously important and unimportant, objects can change their meanings in different contexts or after a period of time has elapsed. In some circumstances, they can be more or less visible both for owners and visitors. This changeable character is a part of the nature of objects that always should be taken into account. In this sense, it is productive to talk about the relationships between people and objects, since the merest move of a single chair in one’s room can have important consequences. Any small changes and reflections on people’s lives can be expressed in their relation to their possessions; “different configurations, that mostly will not amount to anything, but occasionally become the catalyst for more significant changes in the environment within which people live” (Miller 2010:99).

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## Appendix

Acceptors								
Name	Age	Place of Birth	Relationship/Marital status	Profession	Type of House	Chronology of UK arrival	Time living abroad	Type of possessions owned
Oleg	48	Moscow	Divorced (was married to a Russian)	Physicist	Owned one-bedroom flat	1998 from Canada	15 years	Russian books
Natalie	40	Saint Petersburg	Single	College teacher	2-bedroom council house	1999 from Tel Aviv	14 years	Russian books, icons, matrioshkas
Julia	40	Voronezh	Married to an Englishman	Administrator	3-bedroom owned house	1990 from Voronezh	16 years	Russian books, icons, matrioshkas
Max	37	Kishinev, Moldova	Single	Sales manager	3-bedroom owned house	2002 from Ireland	6 years	an icon
Inna and Anton	33 and 34	Murmansk	Married Russian couple	Managers of private companies	Owned house	1999 from Yekaterinburg	11 years	an icon
Refusers/Acceptors								
George	36	Minsk, Belarus	Divorced (was married to a Russian)	IT analyst	One-bedroom rented flat	1993 from Samara, Russia	15 years	Russian books, an icon
Tanya	37	Yekaterinburg	Divorced (was married to a Russian)	Physicist	3-bedroom owned house	2002 from Ireland	6 years	Russian books, icons
Alevtina	52	Yekaterinburg	Married to an Englishman	Retired English teacher	2-bedroom council house	1994 from Yekaterinburg	13 years	Russian books, icons, matrioshkas
Natasha	29	Moscow	Married to an Englishman	Sales assistant	Terraced house	2004 from Moscow	3 years	Russian books, matrioshkas
Refusers								
Olga	41	Yekaterinburg	Married to an Englishman	Accountant	2-bedroom council house	1999 from Yekaterinburg	9 years	Russian books, icons, matrioshkas

Notes: 1. All data at the time of interviews, 2007–2008. 2. Types of housing: Council Houses are a type of social housing, in this case referring to a three-bedroom, semi-detached house, situated within a social housing estate. Terraced houses are built as a part of a row, like a side-wall. Semi-detached houses refer to one half of a pair of identical (mirrored) houses. One-bedroom flats are flats which usually consist of two rooms (one bedroom and a living room), a kitchen, a bathroom, and a small corridor.